Uncommon resemblance
Pragmatic affinity in political gesture

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Research on manual gesture has been preoccupied with unconventionalized and conventionalized extremes. Homesigns developed spontaneously by deaf children unexposed to standardized sign languages have been used as a window onto more general socio-cognitive processes of semiotic systemization. Spontaneous, idiosyncratic gesticulation has been contrasted with shared, highly regimented “emblematic” or “quotable” gestures to reveal a cline of conventionalization. I direct attention here to the vast and relatively understudied middle ground in which manual gesture shows evidence of only partial conventionalization. Using a corpus of televised political debate data from a US presidential campaign cycle, I note, first, that there is nothing as coherent and systematized as a “register” of political gesture here. Focusing on gesture variation in precision-grip and index-finger-extended gestures of Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, I identify form-functional “pragmatic affinities” among gestures that have not crystallized into stable types or classes. Dwelling on the specificities of gesture variation, with its mercurial forms and incomplete conventionalization, may allow us to appreciate the processual complexities of gestural enregisterment in social and historical life.

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Gestural “conventionalization”, that is, those processes whereby relatively spontaneous, improvisational hand and forearm gesticulation undergoes degrees and kinds of systematization till the behavior seems typed and “shared” by some social domain of people, is a troublesome notion. It is sociologically suspect when it exaggerates sharedness and ignores the “variation” – the raison d’être for fields like sociolinguistics – that characterizes the sociohistorical life of all sign systems. Worse, “conventionalization” may not even name one process; it may just be a gauzy cover term for distinct processes that only partially overlap. (See Parmentier,
1994a, 1994b for far-ranging essays on the notion of convention in social theory and the related problematic of semiotic regimentation.)

As difficult as this notion may be, it has been dear to the study of gesture. It has often helped define the very object of knowledge called manual “gesture”, serving as a parameter to distinguish among and pluralize types of gesture. Drawing on Kendon (1988), McNeill (1992, 2005) famously set relatively improvisational, unconventionalized co-speech gesticulation on a “continuum” that extends to more conventionalized, socially shared gestures and gestural repertoires, the limit of which is reached with full-blown sign languages. Toward the conventionalized end of the spectrum were also set so-called “emblematic” or “quotable” gestures, such as the “V” for victory sign (Schuler 1944) or the thumbs-up gesture. Gestural emblems have been shown to differ from improvisational co-speech gesticulation, because they carry meaning on their own and can hence occur in the absence of speech; they frequently bear names (“the thumbs-up gesture”) and reportable glosses, whether metasemantic (e.g., “the thumbs-up gesture means ‘good’ or ‘all-right’”) or metapragmatic (e.g., the southern Italian purse-hand gesture means “Come to the point! Explain yourself clearly!”); emblems also have group-relative standards of well-formedness (Kendon, 1990, 1992; Brookes, 2001, 2004, 2011; for a recent overview see Teßendorf, 2014).

The unconventional end of the continuum has been the priority of scholars like David McNeill and colleagues, who have trained attention on the improvisational, idiosyncratic gesticulation of individuals (McNeill, 1992, 2005). The very fact that such co-speech gesture is weakly conventionalized has been used to suggest that it offers a clearer window onto individual thought. (Compare with Goodwin’s [2003] “ecological” approach to weak conventionalization. For non-McNeillian approaches see also Kendon, 2004; Streeck, 2009; Enfield, 2009; Calbris, 2011.)

While some use the untamed variation of improvisational co-speech gesture to glimpse the underlying cognitive processes involved in an individual’s utterance production, others have turned to the onset of conventionalization itself, where they see a species-level cognitive competence at work. “Homesigns” – sign-systems developed in families which include deaf persons but where there has been no exposure to any established sign language such as ASL – have been used to explore how semiotic structure develops, structure treated as the same as or comparable to natural spoken language (e.g., Goldin-Meadow & Feldman, 1977; Singleton et al., 1993; Senghas & Coppola, 2001; Senghas, 2003; Sandler, 2012; Brentari et al., 2012; Haviland, 2013; for a recent overview see Goldin-Meadow, 2014). In Sandler’s study of Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language (ABSL), for example, sign-behavior among time-stratified age cohorts reveal how new gestural articulators were added to convey grammatical information, how more grammatical functions arose, how phonological structure began to develop, and so on.
I, too, direct attention here to the vast and largely neglected middle ground between the poles of (un)conventionalization, by turning to public discourse gestures used by US presidential candidates in televised debates. This material is useful for this exercise, because here there is no well-developed repertoire of “political gesture” – a shorthand that presumes a functional compartmentalization of gesture by domain or activity – viz. a register that is distinctly “political”; in fact, almost all of these public discourse gestures also appear in non-political contexts. To be sure, as Streeck (2008) correctly observes in his astute case study of gestures from the 2004 US presidential race, gestures in political oratory and debate do seem to hang together, but the question remains, how and to what degree? For one, there are precious few emblematic gestures and no clear signs of grammaticalization. As Streeck observes, there are a number of recurrent pragmatic gestures. Unlike “representational” or “referential” gestures (see Kendon, 2004, Ch. 9), pragmatic gestures do not contribute to “what” the person is talking about but to how the utterance works as a “move” or “speech act”. Streeck’s study distinguished among such pragmatic gestures as “slice”, “index-finger-extended”, “precision grip”, and “power grip”, gestures that were also evident in the debate material considered here, drawn from the 2007–2008 Democratic primaries, along with gestures we might call “enumeratives” (one- or two-handed gestures usually used to tick off items in a verbal list [Lempert & Silverstein, 2012, Ch. 6; cf. Matoesian & Enola-Gilbert, 2016]). But how stable are these pragmatic gestures (see Streeck, 2008, p. 184, n. 3), both within an individual’s repertoire and across candidates, and to what extent are these gestures differentially contrastive?

Rather than try to characterize the register as a whole, I work up from a focus on prehensile grasping gestures often termed “precision grip” – a useful reference point, not the least because precision grip occurred more frequently than any of the other aforementioned gestures. And rather than compare all the democratic candidates, I restrict attention to Obama and Clinton, who outlasted their competitors during the primary season of 2007–2008 and ended up debating each other. A close comparison of precision-grip gestures with slices, index-finger-extended gestures, power grips, and enumeratives, suggested that, for both Clinton and Obama, precision-grip enjoys a close relationship, or “pragmatic affinity”, with index-finger-extended gestures. It is this affinity that I want to explore.

“Pragmatic affinity” is an analytic trope for a degree of proximity between two or more pragmatic gestures in a space of emerging form-functional differentiation within a largely under-systematized repertoire. Similarity is a notoriously fraught notion, not the least because “anything is in some way like anything else” as Nelson Goodman (1972, p. 440) once put it (Lempert, 2014). Intuitions about formal gestural affinity are likely a poor guide, because we can’t know in advance whether, for interactants, it is handshape or movement or something else that
makes two gestures similar or different. In the political debate material considered here, precision-grip, slice, power-grip, and index-finger extended all involve comparable forearm action consisting of downward and outward thrusts; that doesn’t necessarily mean that these four share more or less of an affinity by virtue of this, nor can we assume that they lack an affinity with, say, an enumerative gesture whose movement differs. This essay teases out an affinity between precision grip and index-finger-extended using naturalistic data, with all the limitations that such data entail.¹ There is evidence, I suggest, of a larger gestural register here, but it is one that is in embryonic form and not reminiscent of, say, the repertoires of storied Roman orators schooled in standards of well-formedness, delivery, and pragmatic felicity. There is a degree of form-functional pragmatic conventionalization in political gesture, but it is rather weak and better approached in terms of pragmatic affinity.

Precision-grip variation across candidates

“Precision grip” names a gestural “family” (“groupings of gestural expressions that have in common one or more kinesic or formational characteristics” [Kendon, 2004, p. 227]) characterized by the prehensile motion in which something small appears to be grasped. In his research in coastal Campania, Italy, Kendon (2004) described two distinct varieties of precision grip: “finger bunch” or “grappolo” (G-family) and the “ring” (R-family). In the former the fingers are fully extended and the thumb touches their tips, forming a “bunch”; in the latter the thumb touches the tip of the index finger, forming a circular “ring”-like shape, while the rest of the fingers remain spread in a manner resembling an American “ok”-emblem (Morris, 1977, p. 58 termed this “thumb-and-forefinger touch”). Although both can be considered part of the more general family of “precision grip”, Kendon showed that, at least in the Italian material he studied, the contexts-of-use of the G-forms differed from the R-forms, suggesting form-functional differentiation between the two.

No such subgroupings were evident here. The eight democratic candidates who vied for their party’s nomination in the 2007–2008 primary season used a wide range of precision-grip handshapes, even though there was a general preference for index finger to thumb, hereafter labeled “IFT”, where the nonselected fingers are flexed toward the palm rather than spread as in what Kendon calls the “ring”, and even though all tended to use a similar stroke movement consisting of forearm action producing low-amplitude thrusts downward and usually downward

1. The experimentally minded may envision elicitation sessions in which subjects score likenesses using quantitative metrics and then map gestures into affinities spaces.
and outward, away from speaker. With the exception of candidate Governor Bill Richardson, all candidates tended to resort most to IFT, though several produced finger bunches (thumb touches tips of two or more fingers) and rings with varying frequencies. (Richardson was the only candidate for whom a finger bunch was the default precision-grip gesture.) This handshape variation did not seem to matter pragmatically. Across all the democratic candidates, there was a general convergence in the pragmatics of precision grip, though I cannot demonstrate that here. I want to dwell instead on the specificities of precision-grip variation – convergence and divergence – from two candidates from that season, Obama and Clinton.

Divergence: handshape variation

“Subfamily” was how I had termed IFT-precision grip in an earlier case study of Obama’s precision-grip gestures (Lempert, 2011), because IFT made up the vast majority of Obama’s precision-grip gestures and those of most of his democratic rivals. With respect to Obama’s own repertoire of precision grip (hereafter PG) gestures, IFT is not a distinct subgrouping sensu stricto; there is little evidence that, for Obama, distinct, form-functionally differentiated subgroupings of precision grip exist. This lack of stable precision-grip handshape contrasts with the apparently more conventionalized state of precision-grip gestures in Campania, Italy where Kendon (personal communication) observed relatively sharp and consistent handshapes and few intermediate forms between G-family and R-family. That precision grip here is not as regimented as the subfamilies identified by Kendon is evident from subtle but frequent handshape variation even among Obama’s IFTs (this variation is important, as I later discuss); the point of contact between thumb and index finger varied, from the index finger tip down to the medial interphalange. Unlike Obama, Clinton’s thumb placement in IFTs was relatively consistent,

2. The candidates here were Barack Obama (Senator, Illinois), Joe Biden (Senator, Delaware), Hillary Clinton (Senator, New York), Chris Dodd (Senator, Connecticut), John Edwards (former Senator for North Carolina and Vice Presidential candidate in 2004), Mike Gavel (former Senator for Alaska), Dennis Kucinich (Member of the House of Representatives, Ohio), and Bill Richardson (Governor, New Mexico.)

3. Televised debates served as the primary materials for this study. Barack Obama’s precision-grip gestures were analyzed originally (Lempert 2011) in 28 televised debates, which include 21 2007–2008 primary debates, the three 2008 presidential debates against Republican candidate John McCain, and four debates from Obama’s 2004 Senate race. A number of non-debate events were also considered. Clinton’s precision-grip gestures were analyzed in 13 debates from the 2007–2008 season, and both Obama and Clinton were compared with the precision-grip gestures of the seven other 2008 democratic candidates, using eight 2007 debates. Gesture coding was done with ELAN (Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics).
her thumb contacting the tip of index finger. Clinton used IFTs frequently but, unlike Obama, she often also resorted to finger bunches and, less often, rings. In the following utterance (Figure 1), observe how Clinton’s precision-grip handshapes change within a single intonation unit (intonation unit breaks are marked below with “/”. “P” marks precision-grip strokes.).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>P1</th>
<th>P2</th>
<th>P3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have put forth / uh / approximately 120 billion dollars / in savings from health care changes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1.** Precision-grip handshape variation in intonation unit (Clinton)

Clinton’s “ring”-like precision-grip handshape (P1) morphs rapidly into a two-finger bunch (P2), and morphs again as she increases flexion (P3), her unselected fingers now curling toward the palm. There is no evidence that these handshapes are contrastively meaningful.

Despite such apparently free handshape variation within and between the repertoires of both candidates, both Obama and Clinton used precision grip in rather similar discursive environments, suggesting a convergence in precision-grip pragmatics. The state of political precision grip demonstrated below is one of functional convergence with formal (handshape) divergence.⁴

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⁴ The variation of relevance here is that of handshape, such as index-finger-to-thumb versus ring versus finger-bunches. I exclude hybrid precision-grip gestures, where an additional dimension of meaning is laminated over precision grip through the use of atypical stroke-movements (e.g., PGs that have a marked movement pattern that suggests a “metaphoric” or “iconic” imagistic reading, or a deictic reading.) Excluded, too, is variation in “delivery”, as it were, the effects of which may be considered on analogy with prosodic highlighting in speech. Here, the principal parameters of handshape and movement remain the same but are modulated by co-occurring kinesics (e.g., gesture space and height, stroke amplitude, etc.) that seem to scale – intensify or weaken – the gesture’s “prominence”.
**Convergence: Orders of indexicality in precision grip**

*Precision grip as information status marker: 1° (contrastive) focus*

Precision grip here involves, on analogy with spoken language, “focus” (cf. Morris, 1977, p. 58; Kendon, 2004, Ch. 12). Irrespective of handshape variation (IFT, ring, or forms of finger-bunch), precision-grip (PG) for Obama and Clinton tended to be used in environments involving focus indexicality, contrastive focus in particular – that is, “material that the speaker calls to the addressee’s attention, thereby often evoking a contrast with other entities that might fill the same position” (Gundel & Fretheim, 2006, p. 181). Contrastive focus indexes (‘points to,’ ‘indicates’) a set of alternatives against which some focal constituent or clause or sentence ‘contrasts.’ As illustrated below, there is neither a single scope (“broad” [e.g., a phrase or clause] or “narrow” [esp. a single constituent]) associated with PG, nor does PG correlate with any one type of information-status marking in discourse. To the extent that precision-grip is not merely an accompaniment to verbal focus but is (nonredundantly) coexpressive with it – hence “contributing” to verbal focus in some respect (on this problem, see below) – precision-grip can be said to function as a pragmatic gesture for information-status marking.

**Clinton**

In the 21 February 2008 debate in Austin, Texas, the debate moderator asks Clinton whether she, as President, would sit down with then new Cuban leader Raúl Castro. Yes, but *only* under certain conditions, she responds. At one point, she flags her own willingness in principle to renegotiate US-Cuban relations, adding:

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5. Focus is a notion that stems from the study of information structure in natural language and is used in different ways. It appears in dichotomies such as topic-focus, presupposition-focus, topic-comment, and theme-rheme. For an admirable effort to distinguish senses of focus, see Gundel (1999). Although all this work concerns given and new information expressed in discourse, with Gundel we may distinguish “relational” from “referential” given-newness. These senses are logically distinct (e.g., “Pat said SHE called” in response to “Who called?”; see Gundel, 1999), where the speaker stresses the relational newness of “she” through prosodic prominence [indicated by all caps] even though “she,” insofar as it is anaphorically coreferential with Pat, conventionally denotes old, given information; the speaker presumes the addressee already knows and can identify the referent (Gundel, Hedberg, & Zacharski, 1993, p. 275). Gundel extends this two-fold distinction to both “topic” and “focus”, yielding subvarieties for each: “informational focus” (relational) and “contrastive focus” (referential) – the latter, in Gundel’s sense, being the relevant sense of focus for these data.
1. of course the United States stands ready
2. and as President
3. I would be ready
4. to reach out and work with
5. a new Cuban government

(Line breaks mark major intonation unit boundaries. PG strokes are indicated in capitals ["P"], lower-amplitude strokes in lower-case ["p"]. Bolded font treatment with an asterisk indicates the approximate moment from which the parallel screenshot was taken. For simplicity, any non-PG gestures from surrounding lines are left untranscribed.)

In line 3, precision-grip onset (the first stroke in a succession of similar strokes) occurs on the pronoun “I”, which receives L+H* accent and is in narrow contrastive focus, suggesting how Clinton herself would stand ready as President. Her left and right hands form symmetrical IFTs with her nonselected fingers spread slightly and palms facing each other. Compare the narrow focus of (1) with the broader focus of (2) below, taken some moments later in this debate. Pressed to state her position more starkly, the moderator follows up with Clinton: “Very simply, would you meet with him or not, with Raúl Castro?”

Counterfactuals have often been studied in terms of focus-sensitivity (but see, for example, Beaver & Clark, 2002), and here PG onset coincides with the protasis of the counterfactual conditional. PG starts after the connective until and is repeated, with similar handshape (viz. right-handed IFT with nonselected fingers flexed toward the palm), until the clause ends. The entire protasis, not one constituent within it, receives PG.

Line 4 is prosodically striking. Clinton “decelerates” sharply, speech articulation rate being operationalized in terms of density of syllables per second. (In lines 2 and 3, that density was 5.5 syllables / sec. for each intonation unit, whereas in
line 4 it dropped precipitously to 2.9.) This sharp decrease in syllable density is accompanied by an increase in the density of prosodic prominences (change, was, happening), an inverse correlation associated with “emphatic” speech (Uhmann, 1992). Compare with a moment from a debate in January 2008 at Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, where Clinton criticizes Obama for having allegedly having complimented the Republicans in a speech he gave – a point Obama had denied moments earlier.

(3) Myrtle beach, South Carolina (21 Jan. 2008)

1. uh but
2. < you also talked
   P P P
3. about (.) the Republicans
   p*
4. having ideas >
   P P
5. over the last ten to fifteen years
   P P P P

In (3) Clinton counters Obama’s denial that he complimented the Republicans. PG onset (left hand IFT) occurs right after the sentential connective but – which, as with counterfactuals, has also been studied as a focus-sensitive operator. Assuming that precision-grip contributes to verbal focus marking rather than merely being associated with it, repetitions and parallelisms of PG-strokes likely help “delimit” the scope of gestural focus. (Left unaddressed here is the issue of how projection operates in cases where the scope of gestural focus exceeds that of intonational and/or (morpho-)syntactic-based focus marking.) In (3) PG stroke repetitions place the whole sentence in focus, the core charge of which is expressed in lines 2–4 and, as before, is made with “emphatic” delivery (low syllable / sec. density with high density of prosodic prominences.) Examples 1–3 illustrate variation in scope of focus, while also illustrating some of the linguistic, prosodic, and discursive evidence that focus is relevant to environments in which precision grip appears.

It is telling, too, that precision grip should often punctuate Clinton’s discourse when she announces something “important” or “critical” or “imperative”. In a 26 February 2008 debate in Cleveland, Ohio, Clinton contrasts her universal health care plan with Obama’s, calling hers a plan that Democrats as a party ought to support.
“Imperative” suggests that the complement clause to come expresses something her audiences don’t already know – “hearer-new” (Prince 1981). What makes this pointedly contrastive is Clinton’s insistence that Democrats as a party ought to support her plan for universal, single-payer health care – not Obama’s plan, which she argues isn’t truly “universal”. (In a sample of 18 cases in which Clinton similarly called attention to something “important” [“what is important”, “most importantly”, etc.], 11 were accompanied by precision-grip gestures; no other kinds of gesture recurrently showed up in such discursive environments.)

**Obama**

Obama, too, uses precision grip in focus environments (see Lempert, 2011). Consider this moment from the first presidential debate of 2008 against Republican candidate John McCain, where Obama agrees with McCain that earmarks have been abused and should be eliminated but disagrees with McCain on their relative importance.

(5) 1. but *Let’s be clear*  
   2. uh earmarks account for eighteen  
   3. billion dollars  
   4. in last year’s budget  
   5. Senator McCain is proposing  
   6. and this is a fundamental difference between us
7. uh three hundred billion dollars
   \[\text{P* P P P p p}\]
8. in (.) tax cuts
   \[\text{P P P p}\]
9. to some of the wealthiest
10. corporations
11. and individuals in the country
12. three hundred billion dollars
13. now
14. eighteen billion
15. uh is important
16. three hundred billion dollars
17. is really important

Precision grip begins after the connective but. I will return to the expression “let’s be clear”, but for now we should appreciate the high density of precision-grip strokes in line 2, where Obama highlights the comparatively small amount of money that McCain’s proposed elimination of earmarks would actually save American taxpayers. (This information is both discourse-new – it’s the first mention of this number – and arguably hearer-new, in that Obama likely assumes people don’t recognize how low this number really is.) In Line 7 Obama introduces a contrastive figure, “three hundred billion dollars” – almost every stressed syllable of which is underscored with precision-grip. This is a damning number, because it represents the amount of cash being handed out to corporations – Obama’s effort to expose McCain’s budget-tightening hypocrisy. (Note how subsequent mentions of this figure in lines 12 and 16 do not receive precision-grip; no surprise, for these are now textually-evoked [Prince, 1981] entities that are neither new nor contrastive.) And, finally, the contrast of “really important” to “important” in lines 15–17 is marked with precision grip on “really” – an intensive that, again, has been treated as a candidate for a focus-sensitive expression.

It should be plain from this and previous examples that precision grip is not hitched to any focus-sensitive expression, nor does it regularly associate with any one subvariety of information-status in discourse, nor does it have any rigid scope. Precision grip occurs with focus generally rather than with any one subtype of information status marking.

It begs repeating that gestural “focus” is only an analogy with focus marking in spoken language. It is difficult to isolate naturalistically what semiotic contribution precision grip “itself” makes, and even putting the matter this way may
mislead us by presuming this gesture’s isolability (Enfield, 2009; Lempert, 2012b). If we treat precision grip as relatively unconventionalized cospeech gesticulation – not as, say, a well-conventionalized emblem – then we cannot determine its significance independently of co-occurring speech. But to the extent that this gesture has become partly conventionalized, it may admit of some autonomy and hence allow us to speak of precision-grip use as a focus marker.

Precision grip performativity: $2^\circ$ making a “sharp point”

In political contexts such as televised debate, precision grip does more than help mark information status. It appears to have undergone a degree of reflexive reanalysis and resurfaced as a second-order indexical sign (Silverstein, 2003) for an act that we may gloss colloquially as making a “sharp point” – a rhetorically effective, focused utterance made in an environment of contention, where competing views jostle for supremacy. By “reanalysis” is meant transformations generally in how a gesture is used and interpreted. “Reanalysis” is not intended in the narrow historical-linguistic sense where it captions certain processes of grammatical change but in the expansive sense used by Agha (2007) for whom reflexive activities help motor semiotic change. Such change includes the emergence of what Silverstein has called “orders of indexicality” (Silverstein, 2003). Orders of indexicality refers to sociohistorical processes whereby one set of indexical values changes – is reanalyzed – in response to reflexive ideological engagement. For honorific speech registers, for example, cultural discourses about honorific speech affect what the register can index in actual use. Consider the familiar phenomenon in which “the tendency to speak respectfully to others is stereotypically revalorized as an index of the respectability of self” (Agha, 2007, p. 302), such that paying deference to alter can simultaneously signal one’s own cultivation: a first-order deference indexical motivates a second-order demeanor indexical (Lempert, 2012a, Ch. 3; Goffman, 1956). For honorific speech registers, this movement across orders of indexicality is motivated by reflexive engagement with honorific linguistic forms (“reflexivity”; in the broad sense of “activities in which communicative signs are used to typify other perceivable signs” [Agha, 2007, p. 16]), such as through the creation, circulation, and enforcement of prescriptive manuals on elocution that link an honorific repertoire with a valorized model of speaker ‘refinement’. Precision-grip has certainly not undergone reanalysis to a degree comparable to forms belonging to well-established registers, but it does seem to have developed a second-order valence based on its first-order use in focus environments. Precision grip has become part of what it “looks like”, in terms of gestural demeanor, to make a “sharp point”. Like pragmatic gestures used for actions such as requests or summons, we
may therefore, with Kendon (2004), use the classic idiom of speech act theory (Austin, 1962) and call precision-grip a “performative” gesture on the rise.

Obama

Returning to (5), evidence of this performativity can be seen by considering why precision grip begins on “let’s be clear”. This association is not uncommon. Compare with similar moments from the first presidential debate of 2008 against John McCain:

(6)

Obama 1  I don’t know where John’s getting his figures

  2   l- l- le- let’s just be clear
  P

  3 what I do is I close (.) corporate (.6) loopholes

(7)

Obama 1  but I- I j- I j- I just have to make this point Jim

P

(8)

Obama 1  but that’s (.) senate inside baseball

  2   l- l- l- let’s get back to the core issue here
  P  P  P  P

  3 uh Senator McCain is absolutely right

P

In 6–8, precision grip onset coincides with a reflexive caption typifying and announcing Obama’s own argumentation. Each reflexive caption – being clear, making a point, getting back to a core issue – denotes valorized argumentative behavior and is followed by stance-taking in which Obama dis-aligns with McCain. (In [8], Obama’s concession in line 3 gives way to criticism.)

Precision grip’s second-order indexicality can also be seen in discursive environments in which the need to make an effective point is felt acutely by participants. In the first primary debate of 2007, Obama was asked how he’d respond, as President, to another 9/11-style terrorist attack. A weighty question, and one that Obama answered poorly. Poorly, that is, relative to Clinton and Edwards who answered right after him and who stressed the need for swift retaliation. That Obama mishandled this question was evident from the way he felt compelled to double back and re-answer it on his next chance to speak, even though the topic had changed (for details, see Lempert, 2011). And as he began to re-answer this question, Obama unleashed a torrent of precision-grip gestures, his longest stretch (from handshake onset to offset) in the entire debate. (Obama wasn’t echoing the
gestures of Clinton or Edwards, either. Clinton had made no such precision-grip gestures. Edward’s turn featured just a brief stretch of precision-grip, despite his rather long, 75-second-long speaking turn.)

A less dramatic but equally telling moment occurred on the 11 November 2007 debate. Clinton was busy finishing a turn in which she drove a wedge between her approach to health care and Obama’s. As she closes out her turn, Obama starts shaking his head and overlapping in disagreement. He wants a chance to respond. (Turn-taking is officially rule-governed in formal political debate and managed by the moderator.) After some speech overlap between Obama and Clinton, and then between Obama and the moderator – in fact, the moderator calls out “one at a time” and tries to reassure Obama that there will be time later to return to healthcare – the moderator relents, letting Obama speak. Here was Obama’s chance to make his point. And he does, with a flurry of precision-grip gestures.

**Clinton**

Clinton’s precision grips also suggest this second-order indexicality in which precision-grip is in the process of becoming a performative gesture for “sharp point”-making. In the 21 January 2008 debate in South Carolina, the moderator asks Clinton about the need for an immediate economic stimulus for people who are suffering. She begins her response with a clarification. (Parenthetical strokes here and elsewhere indicate some degree of transcriber uncertainty due to limitations with the video data.)

(9)

1. well

2. I want to just clarify
   \[P \quad P \quad (p)\]

3. uh

4. a couple of points

5. my original plan was
   \[P \quad P \quad P \quad P\]

6. seventy billion dollars in spending
   \[P^* \quad P \quad P \quad P\]

7. with a forty billion dollar contingency
   \[P \quad P \quad P \quad P\]

One may think that precision-grip onset in line 2 is associated strictly with a semantic focus-sensitive operator, the exclusive *just*, but the repetition of precision-grip strokes to encompass “clarify” suggests something else. As with Obama
‘clarify’ is a metapragmatic descriptor that typifies an argumentative act that she’s about to do. Indeed, when Clinton gets to the points that she had promised to clarify, she meticulously punctuates each with precision-grip strokes. Announcements of argumentative points and their enumeration are precisely the kinds of discursive environments in which precision grip tends to appear.

Clinton also telegraphed points through other discursive means. About the controversial North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which was signed into law by Clinton’s husband in his first term as President, she often expressed criticism – and had to, since NAFTA had hurt manufacturing in many key states. From the Cleveland, Ohio debate, for example, she criticized NAFTA while noting that it wasn’t always, everywhere bad.

\[(10)\]

```
so clearly some parts of our country

have been-

benefited
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The resultative *so* and modal adverb *clearly* set up the ensuing point, that NAFTA *did* help some parts of the country. In (11) and (12) from the Austin, Texas debate, precision grip begins after *finally*, which is used here to enumerate argumentative stances and future courses of action.

\[(11)\]

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we need to rebuild America

and that will also put people to work and finally

we need to end

George Bush’s war on science
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\[(12)\]

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and finally

we need a path to legalization

< to bring (. ) the (. ) immigrants >

out of the shadows
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In (13) and (14) from the Texas debate, precision-grip onset occurs after *because*, where, again, Clinton lists her stances and positions.
because I think it is imperative that in the heart of Europe we continue to promote independence and democracy

because I do not think it is in the interest of America or of the Iraqis that we continue to be there

As with Obama, we may also consider contexts in which point-making has been made acutely conditionally relevant. In the 26 February 2008 debate in Cleveland, Ohio, Hillary goes meta. Asked about NAFTA, she stops to complain about the debate itself. Why is she getting all the first questions? Citing a recent Saturday Night Live skit that had lampooned debate moderators for fawning over Obama to the point that they fictively offered him a pillow, Clinton says:

1. maybe we should ask Barack
2. if he’s comfortable
3. and needs another pillow
4. I just find it kinda curious
5. that I keep getting
6. the first question
7. on all of these issues
8. but I’m happy to answer it
9. you know
10. < I: have bee:n >
11. a critic of NAFTA
12. from the very beginning

Clinton’s sarcasm spotlights the very act of fielding questions, which creates anticipation for her own response, which she trumpets with, “I’m happy to answer it [the question about NAFTA].” Beginning in slow, emphatic speech – and with copious precision grip – she answers that she was critical of NAFTA from the start, contrary to what some may think.
In sum, for both candidates precision grip is used as a performative gesture. Comparatively, this is reminiscent of a specific use of the R form in southern Italy, where, as Kendon writes, “[t]he hand, posed in the Ring shape, held so the palm of the hand is vertical – the rotation of the forearm is neutral – is moved downward or forward in one or more well-defined baton-like movements” (Kendon, 2004, p. 245) (See Figure 2). Here the movement resembles precision grip in these data (again, irrespective of handshape variation), and about this variety Kendon writes that the “speaker is making a specific point, giving a specific piece of information on which he is insistent and which … is counterposed to what has been presupposed.” (Ibid, p. 245; emphasis mine). “Gesture sequences of this type”, continues Kendon, “are seen where a speaker is making clear an opinion or a position which is explicitly or implicitly in contrast to some other opinion or position” (p. 245).

Figure 2. Downward thrusted R-Form precision-grip, southern Italy (from Kendon, 2004)
Drawn by Jessica Krcmarik from SG Naples 1999 with permission from Adam Kendon. This precision-grip example appears as Figure 12.7, Example 85, in Kendon (2004, p. 243). When asked “dove inizia dove finisce Napoli” (where does Napoli begin and end?), she offers an opinion, replying “il centro storico, il centro storico, per me Napoli” (the historical town center- the historical town center, for me, Napoli). The ring occurs on the second repetition of “centro storico” with the right hand lifted up in preparation on the syllable “cen” and lowered on the second syllable “tro”; this ring gesture is repeated with up-down forearm movement on “storico”.

6. This second-order construal is not always in play, which raises the question of how precisely it is cued and inferred. Though not addressed here, it is quite likely that one important factor is precision grip repetition, especially high density of strokes per unit time as well as a long duration measured in terms of time from handshape-onset to handshape-offset; this may help make the gestural display stand out, perhaps triggering ‘relevance’-based construals that distinguish it from merely focused-based information status marking.
Here the semiotic motivation for this reanalysis of precision-grip may well stem from contrastive focus. The ‘contrastive’-ness of contrastive focus in respect of first-order information status may have been reanalyzed as a trope for second-order ‘contrastive’ interpersonal status. Insofar as the formal qualities of this prehensile gesture – the grasping of something “small”, the forearm movement – is understood to resemble its pragmatic meaning non-arbitrarily, it can be considered a metapragmatic icon, an image of an act (Figure 3). It is no emblem, however; the handshape variation alone suggests this. Nor can it be the idiosyncratic, improvisational co-speech gesture of an individual.

1° information status: (contrastive) focus

2° performative status: ‘sharp’ point

(metapragmatic iconicity)

Figure 3. Orders of indexicality in precision-grip

Pragmatic affinity with index-finger-extended

Precision grip is a formally variable but functionally stable pragmatic gesture, but how sharply differentiated is it from other pragmatic gestures in political debate? How does it compare with index-finger-extended (I-EXT) gestures?

Obama’s I-EXT handshapes varied in both selected and unselected fingers, but, unlike PG, there was handshape variation that sometimes appeared meaningful. This variation involved distinctive index finger orientations that can be captioned roughly as ‘upward’ versus ‘outward’, with the latter usually following gaze direction and resembling a “pointing” gesture (Figure 4). Formally, this is a gradient distinction admitting of degrees of variation, and, as with precision-grip gestures, I-EXT gestures generally lacked the handshape consistency one would expect of well-conventionalized emblematic gestures (assuming that such emblems are as consistent in actual use as they appear when elicited in interview contexts). Although not a sharp contrast, there was an association between I-EXT-out and deixis, which was not true of I-EXT-up. It is this outward oriented I-EXT on which I will later focus, since it had the clearest pragmatic affinity with precision grip.

7. “Image” should not be taken as narrowly visual and hence ocular-centric. In broad Peircian semiotic terms, iconicity means that one can learn something about an object by attending to corresponding formal qualities in the sign.
I-EXT-up: static versus thrusted strokes

For both Obama and Clinton, two forms of I-EXT-up appeared contrastive by virtue of stroke-movement: (a) a static stroke hold in which the index finger is held up versus (b) a dynamic stroke consisting of a forearm thrust comparable to that of precision grip (and other gestures like “slices” and “power-grips”). Static I-EXT-up is used as a request for a speaking turn, a request usually directed at the moderator who allocates turns (See Figure 5).

Static I-EXT-up can be found as well in contexts of aggravated speech overlap and in cases of overlapping studio audience noise (usually applause), as if the speaker were in both cases straining to claim or retain the floor. Although there is likely some degree of semiotic motivation linking static and thrusted I-EXT-up based on them sharing the same handshape, it is stroke-movement (static versus thrusted) that matters more. That is, static and thrusted I-EXT-up seem more strongly differentiated than the contrast between I-EXT-up and I-EXT-out. Static I-EXT-up
has a stable performativity, involving turn-acquisition and maintenance, whereas thrusted I-EXT-up and I-EXT-out sometimes blur and overlap in function. (This may indicate that the thrusting stroke movement is being isolated out proto-morphologically within this gestural register.)

**I-EXT-out: 1° addressee-focal indexicality**

I-EXT-out is strongly associated with deixis. Formally, I-EXT-out handshape resembles a canonical deictic “pointing” gesture and is, indeed, sometimes used so. However, in debate this gesture is used frequently in discursive environments where deixis is often not evident from discourse. In political oratory and debate, this pragmatic gesture seems to retain a default secondary deictic dimension. That I-EXT-out has a secondary deictic dimension is suggested by many cases of successive I-EXT-out gestures where the strokes vary in orientation and where these shifts in orientation sometimes suggest abstract and metaphoric deixis.

![Figure 6. Directional orientations in a series of right-hand I-EXT-out gestures (8/4/2007)](image)

(16)

1. we should end / our occupation of Iraq, / and we should focus our attention, / 

2. on those who killed, three thousand Americans, / an-
3. was absolutely clear / that al Qaida isA (.) as strong now / or strongerC / I I I

4. than it was in two thousand and oneC / a:nd / the fact is / is that we have notA / I I

5. finished the job in AfghanistanC

("/" = intonation unit boundaries; "|" = stroke phase of non-I-EXT or PG gesture; underlined and subscripted units = discourse segments directed toward distinct spatial regions, roughly: [a] toward moderator, following gaze direction; [b] behind back and over right shoulder; [c] toward lower left and studio audience. All "I" strokes are I-EXT-out handshape.)

We could make finer distinctions among I-EXT-out strokes here and speculate especially about the semiotic motivation for these spatial contrasts (e.g., those killed in the ‘past’ suggested metaphorically by backward-directed deixis [Ex. 16, line 2], the denoted shift in focus suggested metaphorically by a corresponding shift in spatial orientation from [a] to [c] [line 1].) The relevant point is simply that it is not uncommon for a succession of I-EXT-out gestures to be spatially distributed, which hints at the gesture’s use, if only secondary, for deixis. Repetitions of thrusted I-EXT-up rarely if ever feature such shifts.

I-EXT-out is associated broadly with deixis but with addressivity in particular. It is the go-to-gesture to spotlight an addressee for pragmatic purposes stretching from accusation to warning to reassurance. The category of addressee indexed may, of course, be real or imagined, specific or general, denoted or merely presupposed. Consider (17) and (18), which feature represented speech constructions that, by default, foreground addressivity.

(17) Clinton, 31 January 2008

1. but that also says to Kim
   I I

2. Kim
   I

3. this is the best answer as well
   I I I I

4.

5.

6.

7.

(18) Obama, 4 August, 2007

1. in 2002
   I

2. I said
   I

3. this is a bad idea
   I

4. and I specifically said
   I

5. it would fan (.) anti-American sentiment
   I

6. and it would
   I

7. potentially trigger a civil war

(Underlined discourse in [18] marks the period from handshape onset to offset; this was added to show a post-stroke hold in line 6 that encompasses the utterance in 7.)
(17) is part of Clinton’s reply to a submitted comment that was read aloud by the moderator. A woman named Kim wrote in a complaint that there has been “no acknowledgement by any of the presidential candidates of the negative economic impact of immigration on the African American community”, and she wants to know what Obama and Clinton would do about this. Obama answers first. In the segment of Clinton’s response reproduced here, Clinton flashes a series of two-handed symmetrical I-EXT-out gestures, and although the onset in line 1 appears to involve focus (again, suggesting the occasional overlap with PG), I-EXT-out is then used as Clinton addresses Kim “directly” in line 2, and it is used copiously (high stroke density per unit time) on Clinton’s reply in line 3. In (18) Obama reports his own speech. Contra Clinton – and he often reminded viewers of this contrast – he did not vote to authorize the Iraq invasion. As he recounts here, he had issued a stern warning back in 2002 about the risks of invasion, the quote of which is accompanied by I-EXT-out strokes.

_I-EXT-out performativity: 2° making a “force-ful point”_

That I-EXT-out should be laminated over Obama’s stern sounding represented voice is no accident. It is not that I-EXT is the default gesture for represented speech constructions. Precision grip commonly accompanies matrix clause verbs that frame stretches of reported speech or punctuates the reported speech itself, yet I-EXT-out shines a more intense light on addressees; it is perfect for purposes of expressing outrage or accusation or fervent reassurance – any act that involves sharpened attention to alter.

And where better to see this than in contexts where candidates speak to labor unions and on behalf of working class needs? Here we tend to hear time-honored democratic expressions of sympathetic outrage for laboring, working-class woes and blustery expressions of commitment to “fight” for them. In a debate held in a stadium in Chicago on 7 August 2007 and sponsored in part by the AFL-CIO, Obama and Clinton were anything but subtle when it came to courting this constituency. Their voices were, among other things, noticeably louder at times and more shrill than in other debates. (More could be said about assumptions about class that inform the expression of emotion here. Capitalization below marks increased loudness.)
and I originally came to Chicago to work with a community organization with churches and with unions to deal with laid off steel workers Resurrection I've worked with you and marched on your picket lines THIS EVERYBODY IN THIS STADIUM KNOWS THE WORK I'VE DONE

the people in this stadium need to know who:

we are gonna fight for and I want to be absolutely clear that the reason I'm in public life the reason I came to Chicago the reason I started working with unions the reason I march on picket lines the reason that I'm running for president is because of YOU

Address is at times ostentatiously “direct” ([19]: lines [6], [10−11]; [20]: lines [1], [10]), with Obama even hailing addressees in the here-and-now speech event. Clinton behaves similarly in the same debate. In (21) she seems to express anger on behalf of working people while touting, like Obama, her own longstanding commitment to unions:

1. WE WILL REBUILD OUR MANUFACTURING SECTOR
2. BECAUSE YOU CANNOT HAVE A STRONG GOVERNMENT
3. AND ECONOMY AND SOCIETY
4. WITHOUT MANUFACTURING
5. AND I AM PROUD
6. TO BE THE NEW YORK AFL-CIO’S FAVORITE SISTER
7. BECAUSE OF ALL THE WORK
8. THAT I'VE DONE

(Strokes during underlined discourse in lines 2−4 were off screen and left untranscribed. Since Clinton’s right arm remained extended in the same position during lines 2−9, and since her handshapes before and after the untranscribable portion were I-EXT-out, it is likely that off-screen strokes were I-EXT-out as well.)

If we were to paraphrase the second-order indexicality of I-EXT-out, we might speak of it tropically as ‘force’-ful point-making. This will come as no surprise to
those acquainted with stereotypic proscriptions against “pointing” – a colloquial term that covers various index-finger-extended handshapes and uses. I-EXT-out is often cautioned against as potentially accusatory and by implication ‘rude’, and some so-called “body language” commentators on politicians offer readings of I-EXT-out as proof that a candidate is trying too hard to persuade. Irrespective of the question of whether such proscriptions and negative assessments feed back into actual I-EXT-out use in presidential debates, what these comments do get right is that they acknowledge, if only tacitly, the deictic and specifically addressee-focal indexicality of this gesture. ‘Force’-ful versus ‘sharp’ point-making is, in short, a pragmatic contrast enabled through the differential use of I-EXT and PG, as if the two gestures were categorically distinct.

**Formal overlap, co-occurrence, and slips between PG and I-EXT**

“As if”, because precision grip and index-finger-extended gestures are routinely but not categorically differentiated; they are not contrastive forms within some well-developed paradigm. Their pragmatic affinity, the fact that they are often (not always) used contrastively to produce similar-but-different types of point-making, can be seen indirectly through occasional overlap and slippages and co-occurrences between these two gestures. Their very status as “close”, their capacity to do something similar, is evidenced by the very way in which candidates sometimes mix and slip between them.

Case in point, Obama’s handshape variation and stroke orientation. Obama’s PG-IFT – IFT again being his predominant PG handshape – varied, as noted earlier, in terms of the point of contact between thumb and index finger, ranging from finger tip down to the medial phalange and even, less frequently, to the interphalangeal joint between medial and proximal phalanges. This handshape variation means that PG can end up looking like I-EXT-out – especially when Obama adopts an outward palm orientation (see Figure 7).

PG1 is a IFT precision grip with typical hand orientation. In PG2, the thumb’s contact differs and, second, the orientation is now ‘outward’, roughly following his gaze direction. In PG3, the orientation remains outward while the thumb contacts the index finger further from the tip, making it more I-EXT-like.

Unlike Obama, Clinton’s PG-IFT handshapes were more consistent and did not vary in contact between thumb and index finger, yet her precision grips did sometimes have outward orientations, akin to I-EXT-out. As with Obama, there were also some cases in which her handshapes seemed like blends between I-EXT and PG, but the most important evidence for an affinity between PG and I-EXT surfaced in another kind of evidence, clustering. Clinton’s I-EXTs and PGs overwhelmingly tended to co-occur adjacently (in a sample of 13 debates, 89%
of I-EXT onsets were immediately before or after, with no intervening gesture, a token of PG.\(^8\)

Another indirect sign of an affinity between I-EXT and PG can be found in shifts between these two gestures within a single intonation unit, and it must be noted that gestural shifts within intonation units were somewhat rare. In a thirteen-debate sample, there were 23 cases for Clinton where PG occurred with a different gesture in the same intonation unit, nearly half (48%) of which were I-EXT. No other gesture type occurred with regularity in the remaining cases, hinting at a special tie between I-EXT and PG. In a debate from 28 June, 2007, for instance, Clinton speaks of a no-fly zone in Sudan, saying:

\begin{enumerate}
\item if they \textit{fly} into it
\item we will \textit{shoot down} their planes
\item \textit{it is the only way to get their attention}
\end{enumerate}

In line 3 of (22), an index-finger-up (indicated with “I”) strokes on \textit{only} and is followed by precision-grip gestures, which, like I-EXT, are oriented ‘outward’, following her gaze direction. In cases like this, nothing seems to motivate the juxtaposition of the two gestures. I-EXT does not occur at the periphery and anticipate a next gesture nor does it echo a gesture that just occurred. Nor does co-occurring speech help explain this mix of gestures. Instead, we may think of this and related phenomena on analogy to verbal slips (Newkirk et al., 1980). Just as phonological errors (e.g., “outfit” for “output”) or semantic errors (e.g., “refrigerator” for “washing machine”) tend to bespeak an underlying comparability based on sound

\(^8\) This clustering of PG-IFT and I-EXT was less pronounced (48%) for Obama in the same set of debates, and for a sample drawn from three other democratic candidates (Richardson, Edwards, Kucinich).
or meaning (Fromkin, 1980, pp. 1–12), so the spatiotemporal proximity or “coincidence” of the two gestures may bespeak a tacit gestural ‘comparability’, as if the two gestures were understood as capable of being used in the same pragmatic environment. (Again, this should not be considered as shared membership in a paradigmatic equivalence class, because that would exaggerate the degree of regimentation while imagining pragmatics as if it were just like, say, morphosyntax.)

As for other kinds of seemingly unmotivated juxtapositions and shifts between PG and I-EXT, occasionally, Obama or Clinton would produce an I-EXT handshape during the preparation phase but then stroke with a PG handshape, or, he or she would start with PG handshape but end in I-EXT. There were also some cases of simultaneous two-handed gestures in which one hand produced PG, the other I-EXT – again, without motivation for this juxtaposition.

**Functional overlap between PG and I-EXT**

That I-EXT and PG are closely related but not well compartmentalized is even suggested functionally by cases in which I-EXT does what PG prototypically does, index focus.

(23) Obama (Hollywood, CA, 1/31/2008)

1. now but-
   I
2. uh the uh-
3. but I do think it is important
   I I I I (I)
4. for us to (.) set a date

(24) Clinton (Cleveland, OH, 2/26/2008)

   so there’s no difference here
   P P p
   It’s just that I know
   (P) I
   that parents who get sick
   P I
   have terrible consequences
   P p p

In line 3 of (23), Obama argues that one does need to set a timetable to withdraw troops from Iraq, prosodically placing narrow contrastive focus on “do” while simultaneously initiating a series of I-EXT-up strokes. In line 2 of (24), Clinton, similarly, places contrastive prosodic focus on “I” while delivering I-EXT-up.

There was also some evidence of overlap in respect of second-order performativity, that is, effective “point-making” – although, as I have argued earlier, there is good reason to suspect that PG point-making is prototypically distinct from I-EXT: PG marks a ‘sharp’, contrastive point, I-EXT a ‘force’-ful point. In (25) and (26) below, we see the familiar metapragmatic telegraphing of argumentative moves (“reason” for Obama, “point” for Clinton.)
There is no space here to detail the pragmatic complexities of I-EXT. I wish simply to underscore the blurriness within forms of I-EXT, and, more importantly, the degree of formal and functional overlap between I-EXT and PG. All this suggests that while these two argumentative gestures may be routinely differentiated, enabling candidates to perform subtypes of point-making, they are not well compartmentalized.

Figure 8 offers a synoptic, analytic reconstruction of the pragmatic affinity between PG and I-EXT.

This should not be read as a summary of stable, synchronic gestural normativities but rather as a heuristic that extrapolates on tendencies in this under-systematized gestural register. As gestures prototypically associated with effective ‘assertion’, PG and I-EXT could be compared, further, with “slices” and “power-grips” (Streeck, 2008), with whom they share a comparable thrusting movement-type; these in turn may be distinguishable from, say, enumeratives – “counting” gestures canonically used for verbal listing (for a brief example, see Lempert & Silverstein, 2012, Ch. 6; cf. Matoesian & Enola-Gilbert, 2016).

**Gestural enregisterment**

Sapir memorably quipped that “[u]nfortunately, or luckily, no language is tyrannically consistent”, that “[a]ll grammars leak” (Sapir, 1921, p. 38), but the gestural repertoire of politicians here is nowhere close to being a well-developed code. And why should it be, if we consider that there is little incentive within campaigns to accelerate conventionalization and all the pressure in the world to keep gesture looking natural, uncultivated, authentic, individual. Given the fierce and sometimes anxious adherence to a semiotic ideology of “direct” communication (read: anti-mediation mediation) in contemporary political campaign “message”-ing, presidential aspirants of all stripes struggle to appear spontaneous and “real” to their increasingly skeptical publics. This includes efforts to distance themselves from and even repudiate the very forms of professional expertise and political marketing on which they increasingly rely (Lempert & Silverstein, 2012). Were
political gesture recognized by viewers as different from “ordinary” life, as a separate “political” register, this fact could indict the very politicians who use it as spurious creatures.

There is no “political gesture” in US electoral politics, then, if by this we imagine a systematic gestural repertoire akin to institutionalized speech registers such as “legalese”, “medicalese”, “received pronunciation”, and so on. Agha’s (2007) approach to register formation as process – as enregisterment – is valuable here, because he redirects attention to the conditions under which a register becomes a coherent repertoire for some social domain of people (and, with Agha, we must remain alive to various competences, too, such as those competent in using a register in contrast to those who can only understand or recognize or cite it imperfectly.) To turn to gestural enregisterment is to turn to the messiness of an assemblage of gestural signs and make that very state of existence an object of investigation.

For spoken registers, Agha (2007) has detailed how distinct forms of reflexivity help make a register coherent as a ‘repertoire’ (viz. a collection of form-types, such as words and expressions in the case of lexical registers) and help create and stabilize its pragmatic and cultural significance. Many events of reflexivity can help a register cohere and accelerate conventionalization, from register names themselves (“legalese”) to prescriptive texts that spell out (in)correct usage to tacit reactions in interaction where normative standards are evoked but not described. For political gesture in electoral politics, there are surely many relevant forms of reflexivity, from the guidance offered in private consultations with speech and debate coaches to mediatized post-debate commentary offered by so-called “body language” experts to the occasional television parody that jeers at the pecu-
liarities of political gesture. Some of this attention may have feedback effects on actual use as well.

Here I dwell only on the question of systematicity. With enough methodological granularity, it is always possible to undermine the integrity of a sign system. Any category can be caused to “leak”. Cursed with a formidable memory, Borges’ (1962) fictional character Ireneo Funes expressed surprise at the sight of his face in the mirror. So painfully mindful was he of ever-changing details that he couldn’t assimilate token to type. Category membership became a crippling impossibility. By magnifying differences among “the same” types of gesture, and by exposing the porous boundaries between closely related pragmatic gestures in this weakly systematized register, we may begin to appreciate the need to study gestural enregisterment itself, a process of repertoire formation that reveals just how much territory lies between the old and increasingly unsatisfying antinomy of conventional and unconventional.

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9. This is not a comparative study that can address the question of how a politician’s public discourse gestures compare with other contexts. Although PG and I-EXT show up elsewhere and among nonpoliticians, there are some gestures in public oratory and debate that would likely be recognized as register-specific. This seems to be the case for so-called “power-grip”, a gesture “in which the four digits are curled as in a fist, but the thumb touches the outside of the index finger” (Streeck, 2008, p. 166). Perhaps tellingly, power-grip is sometimes singled out for ridicule, just as the very foreignness of registers (“psychobabble”, “academese”, “legalese”, etc.) are sometimes laughed at precisely because of their break from “ordinary” talk. Though this is speculative, handshape may not be the most relevant dimension of gesture when it comes to gestural enregisterment in public political discourse. What is more pronounced, rather, is gestural repetition and parallelism (or “poetics”), that is, the tendency for “similar” gestures to occur successively at higher densities than would ordinarily occur (see Streeck, 2008). As in so many forms of political oratory (e.g., Fox, 1974; Rains, 1992; Tannen, 2007; Bate, 2009; Lempert & Silverstein, 2012; Fleming & Lempert, 2014), repetition and parallelism may be central to a tacit conception of gestural “eloquence”.
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